

# The Linguistic Landscape as an Identity Construction Site of a United States' Higher Educational Institution in the Time of COVID-19

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## Abstract

This study examines how the linguistic landscape of a university in the midwestern United States has changed since the COVID-19 pandemic, and how that change has discursively constructed the identities of the university and its community. The focus lies in the newly displayed semiotics that provides information about preventing the virus from spreading. By analysing public signs such as flyers, posters, and banners whose contents have to do with COVID-19, this study found the following five ways in which the institution and community express their identities and voices. The university's identity has shifted to that of an agent that acts to encourage a united effort to protect itself and its community; a caring entity that cares about community members; a site for community members' voice expression; a space creator to expand interaction from physical to online discourses; and an information deliverer for international members of the community. This study calls for research that investigates the global pandemic's influence on the linguistic landscape.

**Keywords:** linguistic landscape; schoolscape; COVID-19; institutional identity; translanguaging



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## Introduction

Landscape research has attracted a plethora of academics interested in the public display of linguistic and cultural resources in certain areas. Researchers have regarded the presence of language in public discourse as a means to understand the identity and ideology of an area (Landry and Bourhis 1997; Scollon and Scollon 2003). Linguistic landscape studies have shown how languages and semiotics co-construct the identities of people involved in the area and of the place (Gorter 2006; Pütz and Mundt 2018), making the interconnectivity and complexity of people, space, action, and language that comprise *spatial identity* visible (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). These studies tend to conclude that language and signs not only deliver information to be read by speakers of the language but also fulfil multiple purposes for which they are translingually used, including the construction of new meanings for existing language and space (Gorter and Cenoz 2015a; Lee and Lou 2019; Pennycook 2017). That is, existing language associated with a sign is given new meanings by how it is portrayed when consumed as part of a particular discourse by a certain group. This phenomenon is an example of language and identity politics, which shows that, although the language policy of the public is often top-down and institution-based, language rights can be owned and their realisation can also be variously modified by individuals. Thus, the language in use is indexical and political, and people's choice of language becomes a political act to represent their voice based on their heritage, history and power (Ramsdell 2004).

Most linguistic landscape studies explore places where the linguistic landscape has been constructed over a long period. The complexity and dynamicity of the area are at the stable stage of change, in which sudden changes that significantly shift the linguistic landscape might not occur.

In 2020, the global coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic began, changing societal norms and behaviours. Moreover, the pandemic suddenly changed the linguistic landscape due to the need to inform the public about new rules and regulations. One means to achieve this objective was through publicly displayed signs. Higher education institutions represent one area that experienced sudden changes due to the pandemic, because of interactions on campus needing to be strictly regulated. To implement new guidelines that prevent the spread of COVID-19, such as mask-wearing and social distancing, universities, for example, had to develop top-down processes to ensure that faculty members, students, staff, and the community were actively preventing the spread of the virus. These radical changes in higher education settings also inevitably led to changes in the linguistic landscape whereby each institution had a leading role in advertising new policies by displaying informational materials prominently across the campus.

To contribute to the recent research on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education (Wang and Sun 2022), this study investigates a higher educational discourse (that is, used at university) to understand how languages and semiotics contributed to the formation of a university's new identity that emerged in the era of COVID-19. Approaching the linguistic landscape through the lens of translinguaging (Gorter and

Cenoz 2015a; Pennycook 2017), this study aims to answer two research questions: (1) What identities are discursively constructed in the linguistic landscape of a university in response to COVID-19? (2) How are languages and semiotics translingually arranged to exercise the newly emerged identities in the linguistic landscape?

## Identity in a Linguistic Landscape

### **Linguistic Landscape as a Site of Identity Expression**

Linguistic landscape, broadly defined as a study of language “displayed and exposed in public spaces” (Shohamy and Gorter 2009, 1), has been researched by interdisciplinary scholars since Landry and Bourhis (1997). Among the many research interests of linguistic landscape studies is how languages in the public domain reflect social ideologies and identities. Aiming to display the relationship between languages and images as a discourse forming a particular identity, research on commercial districts in South Korea, for example, has found that multilingual signs are prevalent in which English is a dominant language, but other foreign languages, such as Japanese and Chinese, are used to attract tourists interested in Korean beauty products. This trend was regarded as a reflection of cultural power in which multilingualism is the result of the globalisation of the local district (Lee 2019). The combination of a local language and English and their mixture are considered a sign of prosperity (Kim 2022) and a status marker (Tan and Tan 2015) in which English displays symbolic power. Non-English-speaking countries, categorised as outer and expanding circles (Kachru 1992), where English is spoken as a second and a foreign language, often display a decorative use of the English language to express their modernity (Luk 2013; Rowland 2016). This trend of using a foreign language to express modernism is also found in several Asian countries that have experienced the Korean Wave—the rapid growth of Korean pop culture (Lie 2015). For example, the Korean language is often used in Taiwan (Ko 2004) and Thailand (Huebner 2006), indicating a country sensitively responding to cultural globalisation, not targeting Korean audiences.

Implicitly, the linguistic landscape also provides clues regarding the linguistic and cultural background of the community. For example, some erroneous English use in Japan (Barrs 2015) indicates that the English language, regardless of whether it targets English speakers, is sometimes written in ways that deviate from the native speaker norms and the mistakes are due to the first language. Similarly, although East Asian countries are often assumed to have similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds, Im (2020) shows that one East Asian country used other East Asian languages incorrectly but only aimed to convey the feeling of East Asia and to construct a certain type of East Asian identity in the non-English-speaking context. Thus, using incorrect language is also an example of the identity expression of a place.

Educational settings (that is, universities/schools), the site of this study, are a sub-genre of linguistic landscape research called schoolscape (Gorter 2018). Much research has revealed the complex, dynamic nature of the intersectionality among languages, images,

signs, symbols, and people who contribute to the formation of the linguistic landscape and spatial identity. Schoolscape research has showcased that displayed languages are heavily influenced by top-down processes that, for instance, replace local languages with a foreign language, for example, English or Korean (Brown 2012; Dressler 2015). To stand against the power or hegemony of an institution, students and community members have voiced their preference for bottom-up processes. Students' active involvement, as well as that of teachers, sometimes adds layers to the landscape inside schools where professionalism such as accuracy of language usage is not required, unlike official signs displayed in public spaces that have to be written in an appropriate way (Gorter and Cenoz 2015b; Im 2020). The schoolscape is also a place for language learning (Sayer 2010; Qi, Zhang, and Sorokina 2020). For example, language learners can develop criticality in response to the presence of languages in terms of dominance and marginalisation (Barrs 2015; Sayer 2010) and are immersed in authentic language to develop their proficiency (Malinowski 2010).

As Benwell and Stokoe (2006) point out, studying linguistic and visual elements in public discourse that form a certain type of identity in that local context is not limited to individuals and their resource use. In contrast, it is always bound by the social constituents of symbolic resources that discursively construct an identity of space. In questioning what can drive change, the pandemic provides a suitable context, as it has changed many aspects of school settings, including the landscape.

### **The Linguistic Landscape in the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In addition to research on the linguistic landscape in various settings, research has begun on changes in the linguistic landscape in response to COVID-19 (Ahmad and Hillman 2021; Hopkyns and Van den Hoven 2021; Lees 2022; Marshall 2021). These studies, drawing on ethnographic methodology, have investigated public signs displaying warning messages to locals regarding the pandemic. In this type of urgent situation, the two functions prioritised in the newly built semiotics should be to provide signs that are intelligible to as wide an audience as possible and to deliver information. However, this is not always the case. Hopkyns and Van den Hoven (2021), for example, assessed signs in Abu Dhabi and surrounding cities. They found signs written in both Arabic and English, but not in regional dialects and other international languages. They partly conclude that this finding was an example of inequality, preventing those who do not speak the presented languages from accessing crucial information.

Marshall (2021) also analysed top-down sign changes in public spaces, including parks and trails that presented monolingual and multimodal messages. Notably, the study observed non-institutional participation. Grassroots semiotic artefacts created by local volunteers also played a role in constructing the linguistic landscape of the area and the unique meaning behind the language used. This public participation amplified the warning messages.

In another study, Ahmad and Hillman (2021) explain the importance of public figures' roles in distributing information. In multilingual and multicultural regions, helping the working classes of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds cannot be achieved solely by the government, and written materials alone do not guarantee the transmission of information due to low literacy rates in some communities. Therefore, active engagement of the community and public figures is necessary for spreading information.

Translation is also a crucial part of the linguistic landscape in the era of COVID-19 (Lees 2022; Sinaga, Setia, and Hanafiah 2020). Examining the use of Greek and English in COVID-19 notices in stores and tourist destinations, Lees (2022) found several sentences with poorly translated English. However, it was argued that issues due to the unnaturalness of the translation were minimised by the importance of the message delivered. In other words, how well the signs were translated was not important as long as the message was delivered without distorting the original meaning. In the translation process, tone changes often occur because of the translator's will and interpretation.

Furthermore, some research showcased how English functions as a decoration and an expression of modernity in some countries. In these cases, as partly seen from the above, materials written in English are not designed to be read by English speakers (Backhaus 2007; Scollon and Scollon 2003). However, the importance of the subject matter and the purpose of the messages displayed play a critical role in determining the function of the written language.

During the pandemic, most of the changes to the linguistic landscape have involved top-down processes. However, studies have not focused much on higher education institutions, which are some of the places most likely to have witnessed and experienced sudden changes in the linguistic landscape. To fill this gap, this article examines how the linguistic landscape of a university in the United States (US) has changed and in what ways the institution's active role in implementing the changes and accommodating its community members has been realised. In the following sections, the research context of the study is described, along with the processes of data collection and analysis.

## Methods

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research draws on translanguaging, a theoretical framework that views language as a social practice and that aims to explore how all the available linguistic, semiotic, and cultural repertoires are used in multilingual contexts (Lewis, Jones, and Baker 2012). Translanguaging provides a helpful tool for understanding meaning negotiation strategies and translanguaging practices of those with a translanguaging instinct that blur boundaries of named languages and various semiotics in a translanguaging space (Canagarajah 2013; Li 2018). Linguistic landscape scholars have recently deployed

translanguaging to understand how languages and various semiotics comprise our daily life in public spatial domains (Gorter and Cenoz 2015a; Pennycook 2017). Approaching the linguistic landscape from the lens of translanguaging allows us to recognise the creativity and fluidity of sources that discursively contribute to the *meaning* of the physical space. Because space is not a neutral physical place free from influences of people, time, and diverse synchronic and diachronic elements, the linguistic landscape is a site of spatial identity (Benwell and Stokoe 2006), and understanding it requires a broad investigation of the relationships among things that organise the place.

## **Research Context**

The research site of this article is a university in the midwestern United States. The focus is on residential areas and school buildings that remained open for public access during the height of the pandemic. This limited scope is due to the school's shut-down restrictions, which required individuals to have special permits to enter certain buildings.

After the initial surge of COVID-19 in the United States, roughly during the spring break in March 2020, the institution transitioned almost all classes to remote learning and many institutional services moved online. Moreover, it aimed to minimise physical contact by restricting public access to the buildings and classrooms on campus. This shut-down policy, implemented for the first time, needed to be advertised to the public. Information was mainly spread by displaying various types of public materials, such as flyers and banners. These materials were posted in public places where they would be viewed by as many people as possible, providing important information to students, faculty members, staff, school workers, and the local community. The materials displayed the new guidelines and regulations, such as social distancing, wearing masks, weekly mitigation testing, and vaccination sites. This objective was mostly achieved through top-down processes; that is, the school officially produced the materials and disseminated them in places where they would be widely read by the community.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

This study used a data collection method through which the researcher sought to “relate language use to its physical and social environment, and the affordances this environment provides” (Cook 2011, 437). The text of official signs designed by the university specifically for COVID-19-related information was collected by touring various on-campus sites and capturing images and videos. The materials ranged from small flyers and posters on the front doors of buildings, to standing signboards and banners larger than signboards hanging on walls. This data collection process was a circular journey conducted during the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters. The field notes were supplemented with a detailed description of the sites visited. A corpus of 79 images of public COVID-19 signs was developed, including duplicate signs in different sizes and places.

Online materials sent by the institution, such as emails and text messages, were excluded because they did not contribute to constructing the physical linguistic landscape. The university's official social networking accounts were not included for the same reason. Materials made by an individual, small school club, or the State of Indiana were also excluded. Overall, few signs were excluded, and they were neither a reflection nor a manifestation of the university's identity.

After collecting visual data and field notes, the initial coding was conducted, focusing on two aspects: the languages and images used. This initial coding was performed to search for common patterns, creating a classification system to make categories. In analysing the linguistic aspects of the data, the materials that contained linguistic cues were categorised based on whether they were written in English only or in multiple languages. This language focus also served to determine whether other codes could be categorised as spoken or written language, for example, a computer-mediated discourse language such as a QR code or hashtag. After examining in which category of language the message was written, the focus shifted to the parts of speech—whether the message contained nouns and whether the message was written as phrases or sentences. This stage of analysis also focused on modes of presentation, namely, whether the messages used language only or language and imagery combined.

Concerning the non-linguistic symbolic representations on the materials, the analysis focused on the types of images (for example, icon, character, and symbol) and other features, such as units of measurement and scribble. The analysis of imagery cues focused on what was represented through symbols and icons, and types of characters used to represent different groups within the community. For the cases where data contained linguistic and imagery cues, how they were collaboratively arranged and what purpose was intended were examined. Subsequently, this analysis was compared with the literature directly related to the research site and other general COVID-19-related research.

## Findings

The most prominent finding of this research is that all the signs were written in English. This use was appropriate for the institution because the English language is not only an international (McKay 2018) and intercultural language (Lee 2012) but is also the default language of the institution, which is typical of US higher educational discourse and language politics (Schmidt 2000). Foreign languages spoken on and off campus (Abas 2019; Im 2020) were excluded from the linguistic landscape, and other English varieties often used to index a specific target population (Taylor-Leech 2012) were not presented. Moreover, unlike in other commercial settings where English is either written with an incorrect translation (Lees 2022) or used for decorative functions (Barrs 2015), no humorous code was found in the COVID-19-related materials. This finding shows how the institution viewed the severity of the COVID-19 situation, with no room for humour. The English-only linguistic landscape also contrasts with that of other non-native-

English-speaking areas where English is used to represent modernity or to accelerate the effect of advertisements (Alomoush 2019; Weyers 2016).

The primary purpose of the images used in the COVID-19 warning materials was to help viewers receive important guidelines in the easiest possible manner. Unlike icons and images used to express a particular identity and appeal to individuals with a specific interest (Im 2020), the non-linguistic elements in the presented materials always related to COVID-19, describing symptoms of the virus and what to do to protect others. The materials are usually simple and intuitive, unlike commercially oriented materials that typically have complex interpretations (Curtin 2009; Goddard 2001).

In delivering warning messages and urging the community to be careful, the institution positioned itself as an agent acting to protect the community and creating unity to encourage people to behave responsibly. This identity formation was realised by using personal pronouns that indicated personal agency. Symbolic representations of COVID-19-related issues were also used to position the school as a caring entity that seeks to embrace community members and care for their well-being. Easy-to-read symbols and images were used to deliver warnings, messages, and, with a linguistic cue, make viewers read the information carefully. Furthermore, though possibly an externality, the school's flyers provided interactional and participatory spaces sometimes used to express thoughts and emotions. The unintended participation of the community recontextualised the function of the flyers from being one-way informative materials to being a means of bottom-up voice expression. Moreover, the use of digital codes, such as QR codes and hashtags, was a strategic choice by the institution to appeal to the digital generation to which most college students today belong. Finally, the institution constructed an identity of inclusion for international students by supplying non-US units of measurement for social distancing rules and body temperature. The following sections provide additional insights into these findings.

### **The School as an Agent**

The first finding is that the school used the linguistic landscape to construct an identity as an agent urging compliance with the new rules and regulations. As the messages in the promotional materials were "directive" and drew community members' attention, how messages were delivered was almost always inclusively realised. The slogan "I PROTECT U" was on nearly every flyer and poster on campus. Figure 1 is an example of a flyer at a water fountain. The wording "I PROTECT U" is particularly appealing to individuals on campus because IU is the commonly used acronym for Indiana University. The letter "I" also refers to the agent of the action "PROTECT" in which "I" can be the school and also the readers of this phrase. The slogan places responsibility on the agent to "PROTECT U", where "U" refers to the agent's fellow community members and the people with whom the readers interact on campus. By using a personal pronoun that could be interpreted as referring to both the institution and the reader of the flyer through an entextualisation strategy that creatively uses wordplay to deliver dual interpretations (Canagarajah 2013), the institution was not only able to create the

identity of an acting agency that takes action but was also able to urge community members to become “I” as an agent with the responsibility to “protect” others.



**Figure 1:** “I PROTECT U”

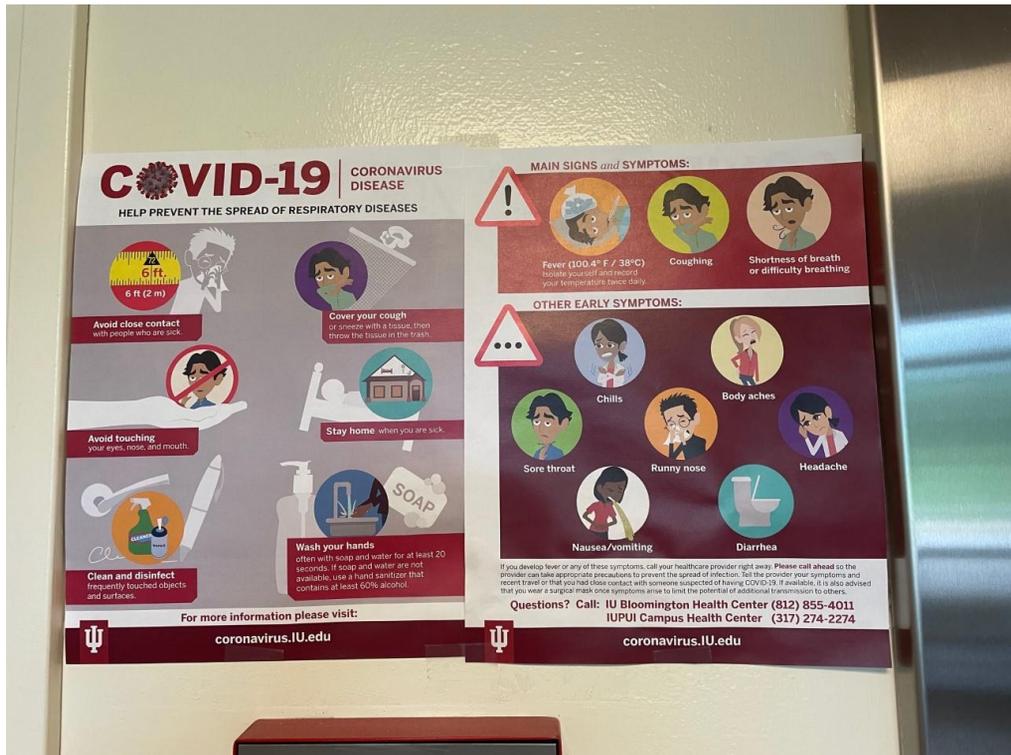
Another pattern in the flyers regarding personal pronouns was the use of the inclusive “we”, which functions to create a sense of community between the institution and the readers of the flyers (Figure 2). This use of the inclusive “we” is an engagement device often used in interactional written discourse (Hyland 2005), urging community members to take action to keep the institution safe. This personalisation of the school, which constructs an agentive identity, is often realised in an imperative sentence and with a modal verb that expresses an individual’s will to act.



**Figure 2:** Examples of “we” pronouns

### **The School as an Entity that Cares for Community Members**

The school’s linguistic landscape was changed to express the institution’s caring identity, to show that it embraces community members and to construct a communityship. In the expression of such an identity, various icons and symbols play a critical role in constructing the meaning of materials and delivering messages. How they were used in the COVID-19 materials is shown in Figure 3, which presents two flyers that describe a method of protection and the possible symptoms of COVID-19. This informative material (informative signs) demonstrates how an institution can create an identity that aims to embrace multiculturalism. In this case, this objective was achieved through the representation of multiple “ethnicities”. As an educational institution that embraces multiculturalism (Im 2020), the university used varied racial representations to assert that the school cares about all people.



**Figure 3:** Characters and symptoms

Another way the university used non-linguistic elements in its flyers was to depict the various COVID-19 symptoms. The flyer shown in Figure 3 used a translingual way of arranging languages and images to present multiple characters suffering from different symptoms. Descriptions that use difficult language with easy-to-understand and intuitively appealing visual descriptions are more obvious and easier to read and understand than those with only a list of symptoms written in medical jargon. To achieve this goal, the school administrators posted a relatively lengthy written explanation containing substantial information with cartoon-like characters, simplified graphics (e.g., a hand, a person lying in bed, and soap and a sanitiser bottle) and warning signs, all of which were synergically combined to deliver warning messages (cf. Gogonas and Maligkoudi 2019). By displaying written descriptions and imagery of COVID-19 symptoms, the flyer functioned as a sort of infographic to members of the public and helped them to easily understand the intended meaning of the characters (Curtin 2009; Sinaga, Setia, and Hanafiah 2020).

The institution's strategy of engagement and its attitude towards the diversity of its members were also evident at the local level. In one library on campus, there was a small picture frame at the front desk with a message asking visitors to the library to wear a mask. As seen in Figure 4, the university designed the characters to represent different ages and cultural backgrounds. Notably, this was the only flyer among the data corpus

that contained a senior character, probably because visitors to the library include young adult students, middle-aged and senior library staff and faculty members. Considering the demographic of library visitors, the inclusion of a senior citizen character, along with other figures that represent cultural diversity, reflected the inclusive identity of the institution. In other words, although language is often viewed as a means of exercising a political act for inclusion and exclusion (Ramsdell 2004), other forms of visual representation in the figure made locally (for example, an artwork at a library desk made by staff) can also be politically effective in presenting the institution's stance.

In addition to the characters representing the diverse populations of the campus, the institute applied selective language to express and embrace their identity. The institute used the directive sentence “mask up” to engage readers in written discourse (Hyland 2005), followed by the word “HOOSIERS”, which is a demonym for the residents of Indiana. This demonym also functions to bring the members of Indiana University together and increase the inclusivity of the sign's message. This inclusivity suggests to the community that wearing masks should be done collectively.



**Figure 4:** Mask up sign with multicultural characters

The institution's messages did not only target individuals on campus. The materials shown in Figure 5 were located at the front of the campus health centre building and were designed to express gratitude to essential workers. The representation of healthcare

professionals, as shown on the flyers and posters, aimed to be inclusive and respect diversity. The materials representing healthcare workers of various “races”, ages, and occupations helped the institution’s message to appeal to as many people as possible and to construct the school’s identity as an institution that cares about essential workers. Notably, the “thank-you” banner contained exclamation marks. In written discourse, the exclamation mark helps ensure that the intended audience reads the message in a casual speech style. By using this specific punctuation, the reader would read the message of appreciation with a rising pitch, helping them understand the purpose and tone of the message (Schwanenflugel, Westmoreland, and Benjamin 2015).



**Figure 5:** Thank you message to frontline workers

Certain parts of the flyers in Figure 3 use a notable strategy to strengthen the warning message and increase its prominence. As shown in Figure 6, which has a close-up of the phrase “COVID-19” on the top of the flyer shown in Figure 3, the English vowel “O” was replaced by an image of the COVID-19 virus. This replacement of the English vowel “O” in the word “Covid” is an entextualisation strategy (Canagarajah 2013) to foreground a particular message and identity by replacing a certain part of the linguistic aspect of the English language with a visual element (Ahn 2020). Unlike the human

characters in Figures 4 and 5 that are drawn as friendly illustrations, the virus image is relatively realistic. This might be because of the seriousness the warning message is intended to convey, which is in contrast with the cases of the playful and artistic representations of O-shaped English and Korean vowels replaced by national symbols of East Asian countries to express their East Asian identities (Im 2020) or of the viruses that were humorously depicted to express scientist identities (Hanauer 2010). Thus, unlike the translanguaging practice that mixes and matches linguistic elements in a creative and humorous way (Ahn 2020; Gogonas and Maligkoudi 2019), the presence of the COVID-19 virus within the word “Covid” can be regarded as a tactical usage of the picture to emphasise the intended warning message.



**Figure 6:** Covid virus “O”

Finally, the co-existence of language and icons makes messages stand out clearly and reduces the work for readers to interpret their meaning (Goddard 2001). The flyer in Figure 7 displays four iconic images: cleaning products, hand sanitiser, a mask, and social distancing. In the flyer, the impersonal pronoun “it” is used to refer to a certain item or an action. In written discourse, “it” must have a precedent noun; however, providing an image in each column forced viewers to match “it” with each icon. The use of the pronoun did not have meaning within the sentence but functioned to attract viewers’ attention with its interactive language. Viewers subconsciously wanted to assign a meaning to “it”, so they focused on the images. This was the only flyer collected that presented information in such a way that readers had to work to interpret the message.



**Figure 7:** Icons using the pronoun “it”

### **Community Members’ Bottom-up Expression of Voice**

The following findings provide insights into a new function of the public linguistic landscape—interactional discourse. “Interactional” in this case means a recontextualisation of the flyer’s original function as an information giver into a participatory site for community members. The images below show how flyers assumed to have a static, one-way purpose of relaying information can function as identity texts such that identities are reflected in a multimodal way (Cummins and Early 2011), creating a space for information receivers to express their voice and emotion in response to the representation in the flyers. Figures 8 and 9 are examples that showcase this change in function from static semiotics, or monodirectional material, to something interactional and participatory. Figure 8 is a flyer posted on the elevator of a residence hall. The flyer shows that the checklist boxes were marked by a reader. This finding is interesting because the boxes were not intended to be filled by readers of the sign.



**Figure 8:** Checklist

Similarly, publicly posted flyers can also become a means through which viewers can express their emotions. The flyers in Figures 9 and 10 informed readers about social distancing, as shown by two figures standing 6 feet apart. Interestingly, an anonymous viewer drew a mouth, eyes, and facial expression on the male character's face on the flyer in Figure 9. The character's gloomy appearance indicates discontent, which might reflect the viewer's emotions at the time. The flyer in Figure 10 is the same flyer in a different place. Another anonymous viewer used the flyer to express their opinion and emotion about the social distancing regulation by crossing out the 6' distance line between the two characters. Unlike the assumption that flyers are static, non-interactive, and monodirectional, these examples show that this type of information carrier can in fact sometimes be used by viewers to express their emotions. The community using static flyers for a different purpose than the original intention shows that the linguistic landscape of that area is dynamic and interactional. In this manner, the institution, regardless of its intention, became an agent that provided its community members with materials and places where they could freely express their voices.



**Figure 9:** Facial expression



**Figure 10:** Social distancing

This finding is partly in line with that of Marshall (2021), who asserts that viewers participate in the expansion of the meaning of the messages presented on signs. However, the aforementioned behaviour regarding the COVID-19 symptom checklist and social distancing differed to some extent because the anonymous viewers' markings on the flyers could be viewed as resistant attitudes or dissatisfaction towards the messages the flyers delivered. Thus, the linguistic landscape of the residential area provided community members with an opportunity to exercise an *envoicing* translingual strategy (Canagarajah 2013) through which they were not only able to use their voices

multimodally by using electronic discourse resources such as emoji-like facial expressions (Im, Park, and Choe 2022) but also to change the flyers' function.

### Expanding Interactional Discourse for Ongoing Communication

Other public signs posted by the institution in response to the pandemic also included strategies to help the community engage beyond physical spaces, including URLs, QR codes, and hashtags on the signs. This was based on a translanguaging practice of shuttling between languages (Canagarajah 2013) and between written and internet discourses. Since public signs such as posters and banners have limited space for information, the use of digital media promoted opportunities for further interactions between the institution and the community in virtual spaces. In other words, this code-meshed strategy between written and computer-mediated discourses was made possible by utilising the recontextualisation strategy of translanguaging (Canagarajah 2013) by which computer-mediated linguistic elements, including QR codes and hashtags, expand the scope of interaction and information flow from the limited and static physical space to the boundless online space.

Almost all the flyers provided webpage addresses for viewers to find additional information about COVID-19. Links were presented with an imperative sentence, such as “*Learn more at SAFETY.IU.EDU*” (Figure 1) or “For more information please visit: coronavirus.IU.edu” (Figure 3). The image in Figure 11 represents a QR code with a description of where it takes the viewer.



**Figure 11:** QR code on a flyer

Although the presence of a webpage link or QR code does not carry any meaning by itself, computer-mediated communication (CMC) was used to encourage community members to take further action. Figure 12 shows two cases where a sign saying “#IUSTRONG” was used to express the connectivity between the university and students and between students and their peers. The hashtag in the digital space functions to take users to another page that is hyperlinked to see all the information hashtagged under the same code. The use of the hashtag in the non-cyber context is an extension of the hashtag’s original function. In this context, its function is decorative; it has no literal meaning but depends on the function of the linked information in the virtual discourse. By drawing upon this CMC-specific hashtag function (Konnolly 2015; Zappavigna 2015), the institution made the message more intuitively appealing to generation Z (Geck 2007) and iGen (Twenge 2017) college students who are familiar with the function and meaning of hashtags. This is not only an institution’s strategy of delivering messages to the new generation but it is their tactic to express a digitally sensitive identity. This phenomenon also shows the institution’s confidence in its strong online infrastructure (Jang and Choi 2020) wherein the students are virtually connected in the space of translanguaging and multiliteracies (Rajendram, Burton, and Wong 2022). The presence of digital-oriented elements that do not have any speech acts (Austin 1962) in physical spaces, therefore, expands the spatial identity of the school as a place of teaching (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). Moreover, it renders the linguistic landscape a translanguaging space (Li 2018) in which the targeted college students’ translanguaging instinct (Li 2018) to understand the function of the digital cues is used to read the intended meaning of the messages.



**Figure 12:** Hashtags on banners

### Appealing to Non-American Community Members

Access to information on COVID-19 is vital. Although the institution used the English language to deliver warning messages, they used other cues to accurately deliver messages to non-US citizens. The flyer in Figure 3 contains units of measurement—one

system used within the US and the other used globally. The social distancing guideline of “6 ft. apart” is also explained using “2m”. Additionally, the fever temperature of “100.4 degrees Fahrenheit” is accompanied by “38 degrees Celsius” in parentheses. Each example contains one unit of measurement rarely used in the US but globally accepted. The co-existence of these different units of measurement allowed not only for the warning messages to be read easily by individuals unfamiliar with the US measurement systems, but also allowed the university to express concern for international students and their significant others. Multiple languages can be used by individuals who aim to express their voices and identities (Im 2020; Rajendram, Burton, and Wong 2022), but presenting the diverse languages of the school population was almost impossible. Thus, in a context where English plays a shared language role, internationally used measurement units were intentionally used by the university.

## Conclusion

Using the lens of the linguistic landscape and translanguaging, this article examined how COVID-19-related signs and symbols helped discursively construct new identities for a university that redefined the role of socially constructed, traditional higher education discourse. The investigation of the school clarified unique aspects of the higher institution’s linguistic landscape that were strategically used to respond to the pandemic. These aspects broadened the university’s identity beyond merely based on teaching and imposed a new spatial identity of the university during the COVID-19 pandemic (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). According to Jaworski and Thurlow, “space is not only physically but also socially constructed, which necessarily shifts absolutist notions of space toward more communicative or discursive conceptualizations” (2010, 6). The investigation of flyers, posters, and signposts presented on campus showed various aspects of identity construction in which languages and images not only function to convey information but also to express the institution’s desire to build a unified and inclusive community. The findings also led linguistic landscape researchers to the plausible conclusion that its realisation seems to be the result of identity politics in which the institution somewhat failed to secure linguistic and cultural diversities, which is partly observed by the absence of diverse languages and cultural symbols of the community members. Thus, the institution’s political identity emerges in a limited manner (see, for example, Ramsdell 2004; Schmidt 2000). However, the use of various symbolic representations at the micro level made it possible for the community’s individuals to actively engage in forming and modifying the linguistic landscape, and they compensated for the exclusion of their voices in the landscape and turned a unidirectional top-down message into an interactional and participatory message.

Moreover, this article has argued that static and inanimate semiotics that contribute to the construction of a linguistic landscape can also function as a means of interactional discourse wherein community members who may have been assumed to passively consume content find ways to express their opinions. This advances beyond the original intention and purpose of the flyers and other materials. The participation of the

community eventually contributes to the construction of the linguistic landscape of a particular area, and this is a notable addition to the research tradition of linguistic landscapes.

Furthermore, due to the significance and seriousness of the pandemic situation, there was no use of language for entertainment purposes in the materials. Unlike studies that have found a playful use of language and the use of localised English (Backhaus 2007; Lawrence 2012), the linguistic landscape of the university does not reflect this language usage in its COVID-19 materials. Nevertheless, whether the decrease in virus cases will result in further changes in the linguistic landscape remains unknown.

An absence of language diversity displayed in a multilingual area might indicate inequality regarding the accessibility of information on COVID-19 (Hopkyns and Van den Hoven 2021). However, the presence of only English may not be problematic for this particular university setting because almost all members, including international students, are required to be proficient in the English language. What may be beneficial, however, is to explore how new rules and regulations should be written in other places where the materials are expected to be read by non-English-speaking persons.

Unlike most studies that explore sites of complex linguistic landscapes built over long periods, the “new normal” caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is thus far understudied. Based on the impact of the crisis, society is at an inflection point where the linguistic landscape has been diversified. In the fall semester of 2021, many US colleges opened their campuses and announced a return to “before COVID-19” days. Most of the restrictions due to COVID-19 have been removed. Recently, the US has experienced another COVID-19 wave, and another phase of restrictions to protect people is being considered. The linguistic landscape still plays a critical role in announcing changes and encouraging people to behave in a manner that may or may not differ from the other semesters affected by COVID-19. Further research should explore how this change from the so-called “normal” to “new normal” to “re-normal” or returning to another “with COVID-19” semester will be reflected in the linguistic landscape of educational discourse and how people react to the semiotics in interactive ways.

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